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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 1801

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FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [UNESCO](#) [SCUL](#) [ETRD](#)
SUBJECT: UNESCO - EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

¶1. Summary. Mission has picked up some murmurs about the desire of a few UNESCO member states to have UNESCO draft a convention that would treat education as a public good and attempt to remove education from the purview of the WTO, much along the lines of what was attempted during the drafting of the cultural diversity convention. End summary.

¶2. Mission first became aware of this issue from a story put out by the Belgian broadcaster RBTF about the September Francophonie summit in Bucharest reporting that "the French community (in Belgium) represented at the Francophonie by Minister President Maria Arena wants to make education the top priority of the Francophonie ... Education is not a commercial good like the others and should be protected. ... The final communiqué of the Francophonie makes a reference to this, but it is rather cautious." Language asserting that education is not like other traded goods and services, is identical to language used by France and other Francophonie members to describe cultural goods and services in the run-up to the cultural diversity convention.

¶3. The impetus for the cultural diversity convention came from the Francophonie with France and Canada in the lead. The Canadian delegation at UNESCO, however, tells us that they opposed the Belgians' attempt in Bucharest and would likely oppose attempts to use the Francophonie in the same manner as before. (Comment: Canadian opposition likely stems from that country's federal system of education.)

¶4. During the last Executive Board, the representative of Luxembourg intervened on this issue. He said, "We have successfully removed cultural goods and services from the WTO, now we must do this with education." He was supported by the Harvard-educated South African representative. (Comment: The Luxembourgish's comment is revealing about the types of problems the cultural diversity convention will face when it goes into effect because the Mexican "understanding" submitted with its ratification shows it is not a

view shared by all signatories of the convention.) We heard subsequently that the Belgian ambassador to UNESCO has raised this topic with the secretariat but also said, "The Bush Administration is against all normative instruments at UNESCO, so we will have to wait until after the next Presidential elections."

¶5. This issue was raised during A/S Dina Powell's October 23 meeting with the Director-General. At the time the DG said that he personally was against such an instrument, but that the decision would ultimately be up to member states. He did not say he would try to stop it.

¶6. When discussing higher education, UNESCO tends toward the Francophile and statist view of the world. During negotiations last year over UNESCO-OECD cross-border higher education guidelines, the U.S., Australia and the UK pushed back successfully to prevent them from becoming binding. The Mission and other like-minded countries ultimately succeeded in the establishment of a portal to share best practices. This came about despite attempts by several states during the spring 2005 Executive Board to see UNESCO create and control a database that could potentially supersede national authorities in determining quality standards for higher education and would have been very expensive.

¶6. Comment: While the effort to have education considered as a public good is still far from gathering any traction, Mission will track this issue closely and work to prevent it from gaining momentum. At the same time, the Mission will proceed cautiously because we do not want to give the idea legs it does not yet have. Moreover, as reported last week by "The Economist," European higher education is seriously under funded and in trouble and is clearly not the model that developing countries should aspire to.

¶7. Comment continued: The cultural diversity mischief can be laid squarely in the lap of the Francophonie organization. With the U.S. on the outside of both UNESCO and the Francophonie when the convention was being cooked up, we had no idea what was coming at us. Washington may want to consider paying closer attention to the Francophonie, and based on the larger Francophone population in the U.S., eventually consider becoming observers to that organization.
OLIVER